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ABSTRACT

Many of the great successes in the history of American education have been in the adult learning area. Some examples include the Americanization of immigrants, the public library movement, cooperative (agricultural) extension, continuing professional education, and distance education. Despite these achievements, adult education has enjoyed little prestige and financial support. Indications of change are seen in the quickening pace of technological change with the resultant choice between continuing education and professional obsolescence, the burden of contemporary social and economic problems, and fewer younger Americans to be taught. Adult educators have improved their visibility, and adult education has received partial recognition, but this comes in a period of financial stringency. Adult educators should take this time to communicate that (1) adult education will work for the full development of individual Americans, (2) through continuing professional education they will concentrate on preparing adults to deal with current problems, and (3) they will try to understand and assist and work with the have-nots--disadvantaged, women, poor, handicapped, senior citizens, minorities, unemployed, underemployed. (YLB)

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ADULT EDUCATION AND THE NATION'S PROBLEMS

W. K. Kellogg Lecture

Sponsored by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and
the Adult Education Association of the U.S.A.

Delivered by

Fred Harvey Harrington

1980

National Adult Education Conference

St. Louis, Missouri

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Foreword

Fred Harvey Harrington, Past President and now William F. Vilas Research Professor at the University of Wisconsin, was selected by the Adult Education Association of the U.S.A. to deliver the W. K. Kellogg Lecture at the 1980 National Adult Education Conference in St. Louis, Missouri. This publication is based on the typescript of the Kellogg Lecture delivered by Professor Harrington.

Professor Harrington's comments reflect his deep understanding of the rich heritage and contemporary challenge of adult education in the United States. For more than two hundred years Americans and their colonial ancestors have depended upon adult education to contribute to the development of individuals and the broader society. Through adult education social problems have been eased, the illiterate have become literate, the uninformed have become informed, the unskilled have become skillful and the unlearned have been intellectually liberated. Unfortunately, because adult education is frequently invisible and uninstitutionalized, the contributions of adult education continue to remain a mystery to policy makers. Harrington's Kellogg Lecture provides us with an introduction to the achievements and challenges of adult education.

The W. K. Kellogg Foundation's support of the lecture is gratefully acknowledged. The Adult Education Association of the U.S.A. is pleased to have had the opportunity to participate in the W. K. Kellogg Foundation 50th Anniversary Lectureships.

Huey B. Long, Past President
Adult Education Association,
U.S.A.

ADULT EDUCATION AND THE NATION'S PROBLEMS

The Kellogg Lecture, delivered at the National Adult Education Conference of the Adult Education Association of the United States of America, St. Louis, Missouri, November 5, 1980.

By Fred Harvey Harrington, Past President and now William F. Vilas Research Professor at the University of Wisconsin.

As I grow older, fewer and fewer things please me. But I was very pleased indeed to be asked to give the Kellogg Lecture before the Adult Education Association of the United States of America meeting to discuss Adult Education as a "Gateway to Success".

I was pleased for three (3) reasons:

First, as an admirer of yours. Like many others, I feel that A.E.A. is something special. Despite many reasons for discouragement, you have achieved an excellent record of publication, promotion and leadership. Unlike many associations, you have demonstrated an ability to survive and prosper after your launching grant (from the Ford Foundation - financed fund for Adult Education) was exhausted. Most of all, you have managed to hold together groups that rarely cooperate: the schools and the colleges, formal and informal education, the young and old, the practical-minded and the enthusiasts, the researchers and the activists. In other words, A.E.A. is broad-based, has shown itself capable of growing with the times, and able to include many kinds of adult educators: those who focus on training for professional advancement and career change; those who

push liberal studies, personal satisfaction and leisure activities; those who want to help the handicapped or seek solutions to current problems. Thus, you fit clearly the ever-more-complex modern age, with its demand for total approaches, concerted attacks on the nation's ills, and with its mounting recognition of the need for lifelong learning.

Perhaps, this means that you, and adult education, which you represent, will be better appreciated and better supported in the future than in the past.

Second, I was pleased to be invited to join you because this lecture bears the name of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. Adult education owes much to this foundation, which has long supported adult education, and has now engaged Cyril Houle, dean of our adult educators, as an advisor. Kellogg grants have made it possible for universities from coast to coast to build magnificent continuing education centers on their campuses. Further training of rural adult educators has been moved forward by another Kellogg project, the National Agricultural Extension Center for Advanced Study in Madison. More than other foundations, Kellogg has backed the community colleges, the post-secondary institutions with the strongest commitment to adults. Then, too, the coming field of international adult education has been handsomely assisted by Kellogg funds that are being managed by Canada's leading adult educator, Roby Kidd of the University of Toronto.

This is not a haphazard pattern of support. All these activities were designed to prepare men and women to make assaults on society's problems. Problem-solving has always been at the heart of Agricultural (or Cooperative) Extension; and the Kellogg Center provides training to strengthen performance. Continuing professional education supplies up-

dated information and new viewpoints for specialists working to improve the national health, environment and public order. The community colleges, with their local focus, invariably become involved in supplying adult education relevant to community needs. And, an enormous dose of up-grading in knowledge, skills and attitudes here and abroad is required if there is to be any progress on global problems, which are the most frightening of all.

Obviously, Kellogg cannot and has not done it all. Other foundations, private individuals, business and labor, local, state and federal government have helped adult educators step up their activities and strike out in new directions. The Kellogg example -- like others that could be cited -- demonstrates that adult education is moving forward in imaginative ways; and that the field has a definite value in supporting efforts to improve the quality of life in the United States.

Which leads to my third point.

Your invitation pleased me, not only because A.E.A. and Kellogg have done well, but also because adult education is a fascinating field. Although it has been inadequately recognized and shamefully underfinanced, it is an important force in American life. Indeed, it affects us all. Surveys, e.g., the sampling reported in Volunteers for Learning and Robert Carbone's recent Maryland investigations, show that an astonishingly large number of men and women participate in some form of adult education (yes, astonishingly large even though these survey-takers define adult education somewhat narrowly, omitting much of non-formal learning). One cannot help concluding that nearly all of us, whatever our callings, are adult learners or adult educators—often both--at each stage of our careers.

Let me give a personal illustration. Adult education is not my specialty; I am classified as campus faculty and administration. But my first professional assignment included evening credit teaching for adults at New York University. When in Arkansas, I wrote and handled correspondence courses for adults, and taught off-campus courses in the Ozarks, i.e., continuing education for schoolteachers. Then came credit and non-credit broadcasting in Wisconsin; and I joined others in my home town of Madison on study-and-action groups wrestling with community problems (library needs, delinquency). On moving to administration--this was a career change--I felt the need to add new skills, and took a short course in fund-raising; and, for recreation, enrolled in a bookbinding class at a vocational school. Meanwhile, it became apparent to me that adult education was a major factor in a high percentage of the projects with which my university was associated--building urban extension with Ford Foundation assistance, to address the problems of the poor; helping to upgrade faculty in predominatly black institutions in the South (with Carnegie, then federal government funding); assisting Third World countries turn competent adults into specialists capable of handling sorely needed development schemes (in partnership with the Agency for International Development and other public and private bodies).

Every educator has had such individual contacts. Many, however, have failed to link their personal experiences with the broad national picture. Thus, except for specialists like the members of A.E.A., few realize that many of the great successes in the history of American education have been in the adult learning area. Included are several contributions that are distinctively American, and set up apart from many other countries. And, almost without exception, these successes

show adult educators recognizing problems and working toward solutions.

Some examples:

1. The Americanization of immigrants, absorption of newcomers into the American culture. This is one of the most dramatic stories in American history; and a large role was played by underpaid teachers who taught night classes for adults in our urban schools. The work continues today, with a greater appreciation for the values of cultures not our own. Behind it all is the conviction that immigrants must be responsible citizens, and not remain in unskilled, subordinate mass.

2. The public library movement, largely an adult affair. Launched with the help of philanthropists like Andrew Carnegie, the public library is now a recognized responsibility of local government. It stands as a constant reminder that lifelong learning is possible in every corner of the land. Of late libraries have become increasingly effective, working with other agencies on broad cultural fronts, serving the practical needs of adults, and building public interest in the issues of the day.

3. Cooperative (Agricultural) Extension, globally admired as a triumphant adult education enterprise. A key to its success is the financial backing it has received from the United States government for three-quarters of a century — incidentially, the only example of adequate federal government support for an adult education enterprise. Equally important in this success story is the campus connection. Cooperative Extension transfers university knowledge to the farmer, applies research results in organized problem-solving campaigns. Granted, there are faults (benefits go mainly to the well-to-do). Yet we have here a useful adult education model. Useful for its financial structure (shared federal, state and local funding); and for the way it directly links the education

of adults with the solving of problems.

4. Continuing professional education, far and away the fastest growing element in adult education at the present time. Business, government and institutions of higher education are all incredibly active in this area. Which is deplored by some, because CPE benefits the already-established more than the less fortunate (successful professionals and their employers can afford the stiff fees). There are objections, too, that most CPE centers on technical information rather than on social responsibility. But the knowledge revolution has made continuing upgrading essential if professionals are to keep current; and CPE courses, when properly handled, can improve the ability of professionals to deal with the nation's serious problems, and can increase their desire to become involved.

5. Distance education. Correspondence courses and off-campus classes have been available for a century; but recent years have brought a great upsurge in activity, with traditional forms supplemented by radio and television, telephone hookups, recordings, courses by newspaper, and off-campus assignments. Adults have been the chief beneficiaries, and have been helped also by the expansion of credit-by-examination and credit-for-experience. I am impressed by the University of Mid-America and its Open University plans; by what is being done by the State University of New York, the Appalachian community colleges, the University of Maryland and several southern states; by the growing interest of business, foundations and government in this approach; by the leadership of the Carnegie Corporation and the tremendous Annenberg gift to public television. Numbers remain small, but distance education does give a second chance to adults who have been passed by in the educational parade.

Hence, it supplements the opportunities for adults available on campus, in night school, evening college and in regular sessions; and the potential is enormous.

Given these achievements, it is surprising and tragic that adult education has enjoyed little of the enormous prestige that has been long attached to education in the United States. Sadder still that adult education has been on a starvation budget for these many years.

The reasons are clear enough, though not particularly persuasive. Many educators cling to the belief (myth, really) that learning is for the young, that one "completes" education on graduating from school or college. There is a tendency, too, to sneer at parttime students, at off-campus, non-traditional and non-credit work -- all adult education staples. Also, to say that grownups-can-afford-to-pay (often they cannot); and that adult learners, teachers of adults and their offerings are inferior in quality. "Adult education!" one campus dean said to me, "That means second-rate courses taught by second-rate teachers to second-rate students."

Happily, there are signs of a new day coming. The quickening pace of technological change has driven home to doubters the need to choose between continuing education and professional obsolescence. Simultaneously, the crushing burden of contemporary social and economic problems has increased interest in the search for solutions--and that almost always leads to adult study and retraining programs. Besides, the shrinking of the pool of younger Americans has forced educators to look for business elsewhere--and where can one look except at disadvantaged youth and the adult population?

While all this has been stirring, adult educators have improved their visibility. Adult education has become an accepted field for college-level teaching, and for serious research and specialization. What is more, those professionally involved in adult education have stepped up their public relations and political activity, are speaking out much more than before and are demanding to be heard. With some effect, we hear many voices saying that the adult revolution is just around the corner, or is already here.

Unfortunately, this visibility and partial recognition have come in a period of financial stringency, and just when all of education is under attack as seldom before. In consequence, those who are promoting adult learning have had to share with other educators budget cuts and feelings of uncertainty.

In a way, the situation is worse for adult educators than for the rest; for they entered this belt-tightening era short of funds, and with no great reservoir of public sympathy. And, seeing adult education gaining in popularity, they had rising expectations that were not accompanied by rising income.

What to do about it?

Well, there is no reason for despair. Adult educators are accustomed to adversity; they have had tough going in the past when others were faring well. So the best approach is to realize that attitudes toward the education of adults have in fact changed, which means that the signs are right for the long future. Support will surely come, now that the value of lifelong learning is established, now that adult education is accepted as an indispensable element in problem-solving.

But that does not mean that adult educators should sit still and await the happy day. Rather it is a time to act, to improve organization and to press, within the educational establishment and outside; a time to insist on proper recognition and status; a time to strengthen the training of adult educators and to push for more and better research about adult learning; a time to play politics, to impress private donors and foundations, the business community, journalists, officeholders and the general public with the value of adult education.

It should be a pleasure to present the message, now that more are listening. And, the message is much as before, with some changes in emphasis in keeping with the crises of the times:

One: as before, adult education will work for the full development of individual Americans, recognizing that in these days of doubt and disillusion, the quest for personal satisfaction must include developing a sense of social responsibility and a willingness to join in attacking the sources of the nation's ills.

Two: through continuing professional education and in other ways, adult educators must concentrate on preparing men and women to deal with the great problems before us, problems of poverty, prejudice and pollution, energy and the environment, housing, health and inflation, urban and rural decay, waste of manpower, the problems of crime, violence and inequality, and global unrest. Nor is it enough to provide training; those who educate adults must be willing to participate themselves in action programs and in applying knowledge to the solution of problems.

Three: since education tends to help the haves more than the have-nots, it is imperative that adult educators try to understand and assist and work with the disadvantaged, women and the poor, the sick and

handicapped, senior citizens, blacks, Hispanics and other minorities; the unemployed and underemployed, the victims of discrimination, the neglected and forgotten. Adult education is the second-chance field, the field of dedicated to improvement of the human condition. As your program states, adult education is a "Gateway to Success"; and success for the nation cannot be assured if so many are left behind.

These interrelated points constitute a big (but not too big) an assignment. For, after all, adult educators were successful on many fronts when they were generally regarded as second-class citizens. Now that their worth is being recognized (even though not yet enough) they should be able to accomplish a great deal.